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# **CHARACTERISTICS OF ECOTOURISTS AND MASS TOURISTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

From the client lists of two tour companies, a sample of 400 ecotourists and 400 traditional "mass tourists" were mailed a questionnaire that asked about sociodemographic variables and trip characteristics. Return rates were 69.5% and 63.3% respectively. Results indicated that these ecotourists differed significantly from the mass tourists in several ways: age, education, income, occupation, trip duration, number in tour group, trip partner, trip season, type lodging, trip planning, and percent of tour spent for transportation. There was no difference in gender or total trip cost per day. A limitation is the sampling method; results may differ with clients of other tour companies or independent travelers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ecotourism has become a "buzzword" for one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry. Ecotourism is considered to be ecologically sensitive travel that combines on-site learning experiences of a destination's natural and cultural resources with an opportunity to contribute to their preservation. It has been projected that 43 million Americans are likely to take an ecotourism related trip during the next three years (7). For this study, group mass tourists were considered to be people who took more traditional tours to destinations for sightseeing, entertainment and relaxation.

Various studies and tourism industry experts have suggested how ecotourists differ from the mainstream mass tourists (1, 3-6, 8, 9). Unfortunately, these comparisons between

ecotourists and mass tourists were seldom based upon a scale that measures both groups simultaneously. Therefore, the information is less comparable.

The purpose of this study was to analyze and compare the characteristics of ecotourists and mass tourists by using a common scale. This information should be useful in determining some of the basis for market segmentation for these tour companies.

## METHOD

As part of a larger study, a questionnaire was developed to assess sociodemographic and trip characteristics of ecotourists and mass tourists. The questions were based upon a literature review plus input from tourism industry professionals. It would be very difficult to assess the general population of tourists, including independent travelers. Therefore, it was decided to focus the study on people who had previously taken an "ecotour" or "mass tour".

Lists of people who took tours primarily during 1992 and 1993 were obtained from two tour companies, one specializing in ecotours, and the other offering a traditional variety of group tours. The companies were selected, based on recommendations from leaders in their respective professional associations, as being representative of their industry. Both companies offer a diverse variety of destinations and serve geographically diverse clients.

After pre-testing with a three day tour group to a national park, the questionnaire was mailed to a randomly selected sample of

clients from the two tour companies. Questionnaires were sent to 400 ecotourists and 400 mass tourists. Each tourist was asked about their most recent tour with the ecotour or mass tour company. There were useable returns from 63.3% of the mass tourists and 69.5% of the ecotourists after a follow-up mailing. Statistical analysis methods included chi-square, analysis of variance (Bonferroni technique) (2), and T-test.

## RESULTS

There were numerous significant differences between the ecotourists and mass tourists (see Table 1). Ecotourists were younger (mean 50.9 years vs. 65.9 years), higher educated (81% with at least a bachelors degree vs. 53.1% of mass tourists), had higher income (72.5% with household income over \$50,000 vs. 47.3% of mass tourists), and were more likely to have professional/managerial occupations (68.4% vs. 26.2% of mass tourists, however 63.1% of mass tourists were retired). There was little difference in gender (ecotourists were 66.9% female vs. 59.6% female mass tourists).

There were also significant differences in the tour characteristics, including duration of trip, number in tour group, trip partner, primary type of lodging, and season of the trip (see Table 2). Ecotourists often exceeded two week durations (33.0% vs. 10.4% of mass tourists), had tours with fewer people (86.2% had less than 15 people vs. 8.4% of mass tourists), were more likely to travel alone (30.0% vs. 6.3% of mass tourists), were less likely to use luxury hotels and "chain" hotels (2.4% vs. 91.8% of mass tourists), and were less likely to go on

tours in the summer and fall seasons (44.8% vs. 78.3% of mass tourists).

Although ecotourists spent proportionately more of their total trip cost on transportation (33.23% vs. 26.73% for mass tourists), the average expenditure per person, per day, was about \$207 for both groups (see Table 3). Another difference was that ecotourists planned their trip further in advance (6.0 months vs. 4.7 months for mass tourists), even though reservations were made at similar times (4.4 months in advance vs. 4.2 months for mass tourists) (see Table 4).

Although both groups felt that their tours were "just about right" in duration and price (see Table 5), there were larger segments of ecotourists who thought the trip was too short (15.5% vs. 3.2% of mass tourists) or too expensive (18.2% vs. 8.4% of mass tourists). Further, there was a segment of ecotourists who did not favor tour packages that included meals (24.3% vs. 4.4% of mass tourists), or included tips and portage (16.2% vs. 2.0% of mass tourists).

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study are consistent with many of the beliefs held by the travel industry about the differences in ecotourists and mass tourists. These differences include age, education, income, tour duration, number in tour group, and type of lodging. Therefore, this study serves to reinforce the industry theories. The association of ecotourists with middle age and higher incomes is particularly good news, because

this indicates that the ecotourism market has potential to expand as the "baby boom" ages. It should be noted however, that there may be sub-segments that differ from the overall body of ecotourists and mass tourists. This should and will be investigated further, using this study's data base. Overall, this study provides confirmation of the market segmentation information currently existing in the tour industry.

The finding that these ecotourists plan their trip further in advance has marketing implications. Promotional materials need to be developed more in advance and probably contain greater depth to appeal to the higher educated ecotourists.

One result differed from the conventional travel industry theory that ecotourists spend more. In this study, ecotourists and mass tourists spent the same amount of money per day. This, coupled with the fact that ecotourists spent a higher proportion on transportation, casts a shadow on the popular belief that ecotourism makes more of an economic contribution to the destination's economy. However, it can be argued that ecotourism expenditures in remote destinations have greater relative impact on the local economy.

Finally, a limitation of this study is the nature of the sampling method. The sample, from two well established tour companies, does not represent the overall tourism market. The results may differ if the study sample was drawn from other tour operators, or included independent tourists.

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TABLE 1

## SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF MASS TOURISTS AND ECOTOURISTS

Variables	Categories	Mass Tourist %	Ecotourist %	Chi. Square	Sig.
Gender	female	59.6	66.9	3.02	.0825
	male	40.4	33.1		
Age	20-29	2.1	1.5	168.23	.0000*
	30-39	1.2	18.6		
	40-49	5.4	26.0		
	50-59	9.9	26.8		
	60-69	40.5	19.0		
	70-79	34.3	7.4		
	80-89	6.6	.7		
	Mean	65.94	50.85 (T = 205.91)		
Education Level	high school degree	15.2	2.2	57.39	.0000*
	vocational/technical	3.5	2.2		
	some college	28.3	14.4		
	bachelors	21.1	24.4		
	some graduate	10.1	12.6		
	graduate degree	21.9	44.1		
Occupation	professional	17.5	54.4	121.79	.0000*
	managerial	8.7	14.0		
	clerical/sales	2.4	2.2		
	skilled blue collar	2.0	1.8		
	laborer	0.0	.7		
	retired	63.1	18.0		
	other	6.3	8.8		
Household Income	less than \$20,000	7.2	3.0	60.02	.0000*
	\$20,000-\$34,999	25.1	5.6		
	\$35,000-\$49,999	20.3	18.8		
	\$50,000-\$64,999	19.8	15.4		
	over \$65,000	27.5	57.1		

\*Significant Difference at .05 level

TABLE 2  
BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MASS TOURISTS AND ECOTOURISTS

Variables	Categories	Mass Tourist %	Ecotourist %	Chi. Square	Sig.
Duration of Trip	1 to 3 days	.4	0.0	57.97	.0000*
	4 to 7 days	21.9	5.8		
	8 to 14 days	67.3	61.2		
	15 to 21 days	8.8	25.4		
	more than 22 days	1.6	7.6		
Trip Partner	alone	6.3	30.0	49.08	.0000*
	spouse with children	48.8	34.5		
	family	17.1	12.0		
	friends	26.3	23.2		
	social affiliate	1.7	.4		
Number in Tour Group	1 to 5	5.6	28.0	376.50	.0000*
	6 to 10	2.4	25.4		
	11 to 15	.4	32.8		
	16 to 20	2.8	7.5		
	21 to 25	3.6	3.4		
	26 to 30	27.5	1.9		
	more than 31	57.8	1.1		
Primary Type of Lodging	luxury hotel	71.8	0.0	403.58	.0000*
	chain hotel/motel	19.9	2.4		
	small independent hotel	6.6	48.4		
	ranch/cottage	.4	10.3		
	camping/hut	0.0	19.4		
	guest house/local home	0.0	4.0		
	boat/ship	.8	15.5		
	other	.4	0.0		
Month of Trip	spring	18.1	21.0	92.74	.0000*
	summer	45.6	32.7		
	fall	32.7	12.1		
	winter	3.6	34.2		

\*Significant Difference at .05 level

TABLE 3  
EXPENDITURES DURING TRAVEL

Variables	Categories	Mass Tourist %	Ecotourist %	Chi. Square	Sig.
Expenditure /person /day	\$0-\$100	28.0	10.5	24.03	.0002*
	\$101-\$200	29.0	51.7		
	\$201-\$300	27.1	31.2		
	\$301-\$400	7.5	3.5		
	\$401-\$500	6.5	3.5		
	\$501-\$600	1.9	0.0		
	Mean	\$207.25	\$206.52	(T=.00)	.9559
Transport. as % Tot. Trip Cost	less than 10%	10.4	3.2	21.76	.0013*
	11 to 20%	28.7	15.8		
	21 to 30%	36.5	35.4		
	31 to 40%	15.7	24.1		
	41 to 50%	3.5	13.9		
	51 to 60%	1.7	3.8		
	61 to 95%	3.5	3.8		
	Mean	26.73	33.23	(T=13.29)	.0003*

\*Significant Difference at .05 level



**TABLE 4**  
**PLANNING HORIZON OF MASS TOURISTS AND ECOTOURISTS**

Variables		Mass Tourist	Ecotourist	T	Sig.
Reservation in Advance of Trip	Mean	4.18 month	4.44 month	1.55	.2137
Planning Trip Before Reservation	Mean	4.71 month	5.96 month	8.33	.0041*

\*Significant Difference at .05 level

TABLE 5

## EVALUATIONS OF TOUR AND PREFERENCES OF TOUR PACKAGES BY MASS TOURISTS AND ECOTOURISTS

Variables	Categories	Mass Tourist %	Ecotourist %	Chi. Square	Sig.
Evaluation of Tour Duration	too long	3.6	.7	27.73	.0000*
	just about right	92.6	83.1		
	too short	3.2	15.5		
Evaluation of Trip	too expensive	8.4	18.2	15.74	.0004*
	priced just right	91.6	80.0		
	inexpensive	0.0	1.8		
Preference for Package Including Meals	yes	95.6	75.7	41.10	.0000*
	no	4.4	24.3		
Preference for Package Including Tips and Porterage	yes	98.0	83.8	31.08	.0000*
	no	2.0	16.2		

\*Significant Difference at .05 level